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When firefighters enter a building filled with smoke and flames, they rely on equipment to help them breathe and keep them safe.

Thanks to grants from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, four area fire departments -- Lake Forest, Lake Bluff, Mount Prospect, and Arlington Heights -- will be able to purchase new breathing equipment to be used when responding to fires or other emergencies.

Three other towns, Highland Park, Highwood and Northfield, also are getting federal funds to eliminate harmful exhaust emissions at their fire stations and purchase other safety equipment.

"It means better and safer equipment for our first responders," said U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th, of Highland Park, of the more than \$600,000 in firefighters assistance grants for the seven area fire departments in his district.

The city of Lake Forest received nearly \$125,000 to purchase new Self Contained Breathing Apparatuses, replacing models that are nearly 20 years old and don't meet current safety standards.

"We have to have safe breathing air for our firefighters to do their job," said Lake Forest Deputy Fire Chief Bob Grom. "We can't send people into burning buildings without that kind of protection."

Lake Bluff and Mount Prospect also received \$113,000 and \$128,000 respectively to replace outdated breathing apparatus. "It's particularly important for firefighters to have the latest gear when entering a building full of flames and smoke," Kirk said.

Arlington Heights, meanwhile, was awarded \$54,000 to purchase a mobile breathing air system trailer with compressor to provide oxygen for breathing tanks when firefighters respond to major fire or other large-scale or protracted emergency.

Highwood was awarded \$89,000 to upgrade the exhaust system at their station, replace basic tools and fire equipment, and replace two defibrillators.

Highland Park received \$84,000 and Northfield \$41,000 to install vehicle exhaust extrication systems to eliminate harmful exhaust emissions at their fire stations.